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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 002453

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TAGS: PGOV PREL AF
SUBJECT: AFGHAN ELECTIONS: SUCCESSFUL, SUBDUED AFGHAN-LED
DAY OF VOTING

Classified By: Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Millions of Afghans had the opportunity to go to the polls today to vote for the Presidency and 420 Provincial Council seats. The traditionally dangerous areas in the south and east reported numerous small attacks, although there were no major security incidents that significantly affected polling. Turnout varied by region, generally robust in the north and west, lower in much of the south and east, and possibly weaker than expected in Kabul, where voting was largely calm but subdued. According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), 6,199 of 6,519 polls opened -- 1,500 more than in 2004. An estimated 85 percent of the Pashtun population are estimated to have had access to the centers, but it appears many fewer may actually have voted. No reliable early returns exist. Although there is considerable uncertainty about levels of fraud and possible low voter turnout in Pashtun areas due to insecurity or apathy, the 20 August elections did proceed nationwide in a remarkably organized and coherent fashion. End Summary.

Despite Predictable Violence, the Vote Went On

¶12. (C) Attacks and intimidation by insurgents were predictable and in line with threat assessments. The traditionally dangerous areas in the south and east reported numerous small attacks. Of greatest concern was the insurgent attack in Baghlan that caused the death of the district police chief, as well as the possible hanging of two voters by the Taliban in Kandahar. We also received a report that two polling centers in Herat were burned and some voting materials destroyed. However, no major attacks occurred that significantly affected polling. The GIRoA's attempt to limit media reporting of security incidences on Election Day mostly collapsed following international community pressure and that of media groups, but was unhelpful and resulted in some incidents of conflict with the media.

¶13. (U) Minister of the Interior Atmar, Minister of Defense Wardak and National Directorate of Security Director Saleh stated in a 6 p.m. press conference on election day that eight members of the Afghan National Army and nine Afghan National Police were killed and many others injured, but that most Afghans voted without intimidation. Those who defied intimidation showed great courage, Atmar said.

¶14. (U) Many of our interlocutors suggested that voter turnout was lower than usual during the morning hours because people were waiting to see how dangerous it was to go to the polling stations. Throughout the day the IEC's main message was "polls are open, we're working with security forces to deal with problems, and Afghans should get out and vote before 4 p.m." To set an example, President Karzai and Independent Election Commission Chairman Ludin cast their votes soon after polling began. Voting was extended for one hour, to 5 p.m., in light of some polls' late start. At 6 p.m. Kabul time ISAF noted that "its forces were engaged in

insurgent forces today, including indirect and direct fire attacks against FOBs and patrols, but these engagements were not/not election related. Indeed, insurgent violence directed against election sites and events was quite capably handled by ANSF, and ANSF did not request ISAF support in any election-related security events."

Scale of Fraud Reportedly Sporadic, not Systemic

¶ 15. (SBU) Prior to polling day, we saw some blatant, last-minute attempts at fraud, led by Karzai's security ministers with the apparent complicity of some local election officials. This involved moving ballot boxes to insecure areas; ISAF in particular tried to minimize the impact through denying logistic support and we registered our concerns with the Afghan authorities. We received reports from several provinces that the ink used to mark voters' fingers "washed off" on their fingers. Candidates Bashardost and Ghani are among those who complained the ink was flawed. The IEC is investigating these allegations and suspects the ink bottles may not have been adequately shaken. UNAMA Director Galbraith termed this a "minor issue." Some provinces reported isolated cases of minors with voter ID cards voting or intending to vote. Allegations of fraud will become a key theme in the next week, especially if Karzai claims to clear the 50% hurdle.

¶ 16. (SBU) Dr. Abdullah gave a press conference several hours after voting closed, stating that he was pleased, overall, with the elections process. He added that he had some

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complaints about possible irregularities and fraud, and would bring those complaints to the Electoral Complaints Commission. His advisors were in touch with the Embassy during the day with complaints but appeared at all times to be seeking local remedies as well as bringing their concerns to the IEC.

¶ 17. (U) By far, the most commonly reported technical glitch on Election Day concerned faulty hole punchers. However, the IEC quickly remedied the problem by instructing poll station officials to cut off a corner of each voters' voter ID card to indicate they had voted. Other complaints concerned the lack of privacy in certain polling stations, where voting booths were in plain sight of observers or with windows directly behind them. A third complaint was the lack of balloting material, but the IEC addressed this by shifting materials within districts.

Domestic Observers: A Careful, Positive Assessment

¶ 18. (U) The domestic observer group "Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan" (FEFA), based on two rounds of reporting by its observers, released a statement at 9 p.m. praising Afghans for their commitment to developing a lasting democratic system. FEFA stated that the IEC, candidates and campaigns, state security institutions, the media, and civil society all played instrumental roles in ensuring that people could exercise their right to vote. FEFA, which fielded over 7,300 observers in all 34 provinces, reported that many polling centers throughout the country opened late and in some instances closed early. FEFA observers also noted the problems with holepunchers and questions regarding the durability of the indelible ink to mark voters' fingers, although there were also reports that the ink re-emerges after one attempts to wash it off. FEFA observers also reported complaints that some IEC local staff were not impartial, that female electoral staff was largely absent at many polling stations throughout the country, and that cases of male proxy voting were reported.

¶9. (U) According to FEFA's preliminary impressions, voter turnout appears to have been lower than during the 2004 presidential elections. FEFA also described election day security in less positive terms than the MOD and MOI, noting "grenade and rocket attacks directed at polling and city centers which emerged as a major form of disruption in many partys of the country. These attacks continued throughout the day." In closing, FEFA noted that the electoral process is now entering the critical phase of vote counting and verification, and at this time had no initial assessment of the election's credibility.

Will the Poll Numbers Hold?

¶10. (SBU) Various public polls had placed Karzai in the mid 40%; Abdullah in the mid-high 20%; Bashardost around 10% and Ghani trailing with around 6%. The last-minute variables that may have affected these figures included Karzai's presence at Sunday night's debate and Abdullah's absence; Dostum's return (favoring Karzai); and minor candidates attempting to drop out, most in favor of Karzai. Against this, possible low voter turnout in the South and East may jeopardize Karzai's hope for a first round win.

¶11. (U) For the first time in Afghanistan's history, the country has had a truly national debate about issues, personalities and politics. The explosion in Afghan media (sometime inaccurate, often biased) has enabled virtually every Afghan to be exposed to the debate, including Pashtun women who cannot leave the house, but sometimes listen to the radio. Encouraged by our approaches, the candidates have set out crude platforms and policy positions. Candidates have held large and small rallies alike around the country, taking their platforms to the people. This is a success story we need to reinforce and build on as part of the move to build up Afghan civil society and institutions to hold their new government to account.

¶12. (C) The election has also refocused attention on the ongoing influence of former warlords, such as Dostum, Fahim Khan or Khalili for Karzai, or the Jamiat warlords for Abdullah. Although both candidates claim to support merit-based appointments, the signal their associations convey is unwelcome for both us and many Afghans. The selection of qualified Afghan government leaders must be one of our highest post-election priority: without them, delivery on other objectives will be much more difficult.

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Our Role

¶13. (SBU) The United States released several significant statements during the campaign period, in particular the President's June 16th statement and the Secretary's on August 17th. The President's statement was critical to efforts to "level the candidate's playing field" while the Secretary's reminded key Afghan political leaders of the need for responsible post-election behavior. The Embassy released a statement at the end of the day, which reads in its entirety:

Begin text:

The American people congratulate the people of Afghanistan as this Election Day concludes, on the historic occasion of your nation leading, for the first time, democratic elections for President and Provincial Councils. Along with others in the international community, we await the announcements of official results by the Independent Electoral Commission in the days ahead.

End text.

¶14. (U) We must manage expectations that results will be quick. The Afghan authorities have the lead on messaging; relevant election authorities plan to hold at least daily updates over the next couple of weeks. The key dates ahead are:

--Aug 21-22: Observer Mission Reports
--Aug 25: Initial Results from IEC (not August 23, as previously announced)
--Sept 3: Preliminary Official Results
--Sept 17: Final Certified Results
--Oct 10: Possible Inauguration

Approximate Runoff Schedule

--Oct 1: Runoff
--Oct 15: Preliminary Results
--Oct 29: Final Results
--Nov 28: Inauguration

¶15. (C) The next few days may be very challenging. FEFA's cautiously positive assessment is very important since it represents an Afghan "report card" on the conduct of voting today. Election Day was a significant step in the Afghan people's difficult path towards democracy. Threats and violence did not derail the process, although turnout in some regions appears low. Now the votes must be tallied, complaints reviewed, and official results released. The ultimate test will be whether the Afghan people accept the electoral outcome and view their government with increased legitimacy.

¶16. (C) Although too early to tell, we see two likely scenarios emerging. First is that Karzai claims a first-round victory which in light of possible low Pashtun voter turnout would not be viewed as credible, especially by Abdullah's adherents, with consequent charges of fraud leading to political gridlock and possible instability. The second would be that Karzai obviously gained less than 50% of the vote, in which case the election passes to a second round with the attendant difficulty of managing the runoff and maintaining national cohesion during the subsequent campaign in which ethnic cards may be come the weapons of choice for contending factions. Mitigating against severe instability is the strong Afghan desire to avoid a return to the dark days of their civil war and Taliban past. That commonsense approach was clearly evident during the extended campaign period that proved remarkably civil with low levels of violence.

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